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SUBJECT: THE BIRTH OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA:
A NEW HOPE FOR THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM?

Background:

1. Nigerian universities, once among the best in Africa, deteriorated badly under 30 years of military rule. Nor was their plight alleviated during the last four years of democratic governance. They remain overcrowded, poorly funded and decrepit. Currently, there are 42 universities: 25 federal, 12 state, and 7 private. The universities are supervised by the National Universities Commission (NUC), a coordinating body that sets academic standards and allocates budgets.

2. Plagued by insufficient funds, student and faculty strikes, and leadership crises, public universities are in constant turmoil. Students continually strike over payment of small annual fees for housing and meals. Faculty members protest late salary payments, poor teaching conditions, and low budget allocations for education (1.85 percent of the 2003 budget). A 5-month strike called by the academic staff union in December is finally ending as universities gradually re-open.

A New Challenge to Universities: Student Cults

3. Over the past decade, student cults have caused a breakdown of law and order on university campuses and are now endemic. A perverted form of terrorism, disruption seems to be their only goal. Cultists engage in murder, anarchy, arson, rape, and ritual killings that often force universities to close.

4. The Obasanjo Administration has cracked down on cults, and several students, lecturers and Vice-Chancellors have been expelled or suspended for participating in cult activities. Anti-cultism billboards are erected on every campus and in nearby towns. Students and community groups organize theatrical productions and other public events to campaign against cults. Still, the problem persists and is one more challenge for public universities.

Private Universities: An Alternative System in the Making?

5. Five years ago, the NUC approved eight private universities. Supporters hailed their arrival as a "renaissance" in higher education while critics saw their existence as "cheapening and commercializing" higher education in Nigeria. Nonetheless, the perennial disruption of public universities has made private universities a much sought-after alternative for parents and students.

6. Four of the five private universities are church-affiliated, and all are located in southern Nigeria. Predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria has yet to open a private university although Heritage University in Kaduna, sponsored by former military dictator General Ibrahim Babangida, was one of the first private universities approved.

7. All but one of the universities offer moral teachings along with academic courses and an emphasis on community service. These universities are much better equipped than their public counterparts and more advanced in technology, administration and academic development. They have plans for an annual meeting and

a joint sports and cultural festival. Though gradually increasing, enrollments in these private universities represent less than one percent of the total population of university students.

18. Tuition at private universities ranges between \$3,000 to \$5,000 -- an enormous sum of money in a country where the average annual income is \$300. Still, many wealthy parents, when unable to send their children abroad, are now turning to private universities as the only institutions where a student can complete a Bachelor's degree in four years.

18. The number of private universities may grow in the future. On May 28, one day before the Obasanjo/Atiku inauguration, the NUC awarded a license to ABTI University in Adamawa, the home state of Vice President Atiku. Three additional universities are already approved, and applications for seven new universities are pending. Thus, there are potentially ten new private universities that could eventually join the five currently operating universities.

19. Following are brief descriptions of the private universities currently functioning. Note that the NUC lists two other universities besides the following five on its list: The Pan-African University, an extension of the prominent Lagos Business School, yet to officially open; and the Benson Idahosa University in Benin City, about which PAS was unable to find substantial information.

Private Universities: A Description of the Big Five:

10. Igbiniedion University in Edo State was the first private university to be established. It matriculated the 3rd set of students (about 2000) in May 2003 and plans to establish a Postgraduate School in the near future. Igbiniedion's College of Medicine is the first in a private university to be accredited by the Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria. In addition to its own resources, the university receives financial support from foreign individuals, organizations and foundations.

11. Bowen University in Osun State developed from the Nigerian Baptist College (a teacher training institute). Barely a year old, it has over 500 students and three faculties. It is funded by the Nigerian Baptist Convention and operates on a shoe - string budget. It has yet to establish substantial ties with Baptists elsewhere. Located in a rural Muslim community, Bowen has been well received.

12. Babcock University in Ogun State is affiliated with the Seventh Day Adventist church. Like Bowen, it has three major faculties. But, it has more facilities, courses and teaching faculty than Bowen. Babcock has established links with several local and international foundations and agencies that have contributed generously to its development. Founded in 1914 by American Missionary David Babcock, Babcock is modeled on American universities and has Nigeria's only known work-study program. Students run its highly developed agricultural plantations, food services program and maintain its attractive campus grounds.

10. Madonna University of Science and Technology in Anambra State is affiliated with the Catholic church. The Catholic faith is practiced by over 80% of Nigerians in the East and dates back to the establishment of Catholic churches, convents and schools in the post-slave trade era. Madonna is a product of its regional surroundings, reflecting not only the predominant religion but also the preference of indigenes for technical and industrial subjects.

11. Covenant University, just outside of Lagos, is funded by Pentecostals. The campus is built on "CanaanLand" and attached to its enormous chapel. Like the chapel, Covenant was built entirely by volunteer labor and took only a year to construct. Affiliated with Oral Roberts University in the U.S., Covenant held its first matriculation ceremony early this year and has over a thousand students in three faculties and twenty departments.

Conclusion:

12. Whether or not they represent the future of Nigerian higher education, a sort of Nigerian Ivy League or just something entirely different, private universities are on the rise and are attracting international attention and support. Right now, a degree from the University of Ibadan or Amadou Bello University is more prestigious than a degree from any of the private universities. However, if upheaval continues in the public universities this may change. Private universities are not perfect -- they have their own administrative problems, and there is a report of cultism at Babcock -- however, their emergence has been a positive development in Nigerian higher education that bears watching.

HINSON-JONES